

Our Passion for Work: Lessons From a Mentor

revisionpath.com/lessons-from-a-mentor

September 27, 2018



Last month, designer Mary Ann Badavi and I conducted a workshop on service design during UX Week in San Francisco. But less than a year ago, we'd never met and never worked on a project before. We come from very different backgrounds and work in different aspects of design.

How did this happen?



Mary Ann Badavi and I present our Design for Good project. Photo credit: AIGA DC

How It All Began

In 2016, I joined SHINE, a peer-to-peer mentoring program created by AIGA DC. I wasn't sure I had what it took to be a mentor, but a few years ago, I knew I was ready to take on more leadership roles in my career. Mentoring in a formal program was a great way to support a younger designer's potential while not experiencing the high stakes of tying success to job performance. But more importantly, I was passionate about good leadership at work. More and more, workers in the United States reported being unhappy at work, usually due to dissatisfaction with a supervisor. For me, finding tangible ways to actually care about what I did 40+ hours a week mattered. That included prioritizing opportunities to learn how my leadership style affected others.

I'll keep it a hundred – my first mentee in the 2017 cycle was a worst case scenario. We both came into SHINE with high hopes and initially seemed to hit it off, but the honeymoon period soon wore off. She would not take the advice I gave her. She was frequently unresponsive to my calls or emails. I became concerned about her well-being and even asked the program

coordinators to intervene. After admitting that she applied for an open position at my now former employer, I began to suspect that she only wanted to be a part of SHINE to get a job. And after a few months, she completely dropped out of the program.

In hindsight, her failure to see the program through to the end was also my failure. I didn't set up weekly check-ins with her. Because I had been shell-shocked by micromanagers in the past I took a casual, hands-off approach, hoping our mutual enthusiasm would carry us for the next five months. I failed to set boundaries with her. I found myself offering emotional support to my mentee rather than being a professional guide. I didn't sufficiently say no. My next several months in SHINE could have become discouraging.

Because I had access to a larger network of mentors, I reached out to them and was honest about what went on. They gave me crucial advice and pushed me to try mentoring through SHINE again the following year. The 2018 experience was a complete 180-degree turn.

Turning It Around

The first thing I did when I met Mary Ann, after getting to know her background and areas of interest, was commit to a set schedule with her twice a week; once in person and once on the phone. We spent our time working on a Design for Good project where she focused on the emergency room experience. This was her first time learning how to use environmental design and digital design to draw in perspective and at a human scale to solve a real-world problem. Aside from teaching her how to sketch in one- and two-point perspective, I noted where she was making progress and where she needed to grow. We discussed our experiences with giving and receiving feedback, and the different ways we are both perceived as women of color. Mary Ann was the first person I invited when I was tapped to workshop service design as a tool to address physical experiences such as the public bus system. She really embraced the opportunity, and we have gotten into service design and become very good thought partners.

When I look back over the past two years mentoring with SHINE, here's what I've learned.

Coach Healthy Ambition

Young professionals are often given a bad rap. We call them entitled, forgetting that at some point, the previous generation probably said that about us. Recognize that behavior for what it is: ambition. And if that ambition is marked with an unfettered passion, the side effect is a lack of tact—that can be taught. A formal mentoring program is a way to step in and encourage that passion, but with a respect for boundaries and a deference for age and experience.

Check Yourself, But With Some Assistance

I like a formal mentoring program as a structure for external accountability. Both my mentee and I had people within SHINE to rely on for advice, but turning that into a change in personal behavior requires self-awareness and reflection. If your mentee avoids or reschedules

meetings, or finds themselves repeating details to you, ask them how your mentoring could be more effective for them. I noticed that by failing to take good notes, I frequently forgot important details about Mary Ann's personal and professional life, thereby forcing her to "manage up" to me. Checking yourself doesn't necessarily mean being hard on yourself; it simply means taking time to make sure you are honoring the commitments you made.

Make This an Opportunity to Be Vulnerable

Mentorship programs offer a rare chance to reflect on your leadership style. Like I mentioned earlier, my lack of good note-taking forced Mary Ann to repeat things back to me. I acknowledged this mistake, and worked to be better at recalling those details. Remember what it was like for you at that stage of your professional and personal life? Remind your mentee how hard it was for you. Admit that you don't have all the answers, but that you do know some things they don't know yet.

On the surface, mentoring can be an opportunity for mutual professional growth. But as you go deeper you will discover that mentoring can also be a kind of adult friendship predicated less on baby showers, weddings, vacations, and happy hours, but one based on the idea that our shared profession matters. And that we love it so much, we're committed to making each other better in our processes, more successful in our goals, and possibly becoming colleagues through life-changing opportunities.

Header Illustration by [Gel Jamlang](#).